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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with problems, patterns, and phases of adjustment to new environments. It focuses on studies of the adaptation of foreign students and Peace Corps volunteers but the findings can apply to other types of cross-cultural contact. Basically the studies indicate how complex the problem is. Adaptation takes place on different levels; for instance, surface adjustment, achievement of specific goals, and global satisfaction may mask a deeper failure of meaningful interpersonal contact or enduring cognitive and affective change. Adaptation is defined as a process of attitudinal or behavioral change in response to new stimuli. Conflict and stress are key elements of adjustment. The different phases of adjustment are: (1) spectator phase, (2) stress and adaptation phase, (3) coming-to-terms phase, and (4) decision phase. The four most commonly observed patterns of adaptation, instrumental adaptation, identification, withdrawal and resistance, represent different processes of cross-cultural involvement and attitude change. It is concluded that culture plays an important role in defining the details of role conflict and determines what is stressful, but patterns of adaptive responses to stress are similar across cultures. (Author/AM)

OVERVIEW: ADAPTATION TO NEW CULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS

Marjorie H. Klein

Introduction and History of the Problem

People have been crossing national and cultural boundaries for centuries, and though systematic study of the impact is relatively recent, we have no reason to doubt that the problems, patterns and phases of adjustment have remained fairly constant. In this overview I will focus on studies of the adaptation of foreign students and Peace Corps volunteers, but I assume that the findings may apply, with modifications, to other types of cross-cultural contact.

Research on foreign student adaptation dates from the post-World War II period when many overseas exchange programs were initiated. Much of the early research was methodologically weak and was more concerned with evaluating program impact and effectiveness than with understanding adaptation as a complex process (see Cormack, 1962, Mestenhauser, 1961, and Walton, 1967 for critique and review).

The most significant contribution to research and conceptual development in this area came from a series of studies coordinated by Smith and sponsored by the Social Science Research Council. The purpose of these studies was to open up the foreign student area for research and to provide a "natural history" from a social psychology perspective of the processes involved in sojourn and return. These studies covered four national groups in America and comparable groups of return students, with coordinated questionnaire and methodology interview. Findings for interviews with a sample of 19 Indians at the University of Pennsylvania are reported by Lambert and Bressler (1956); for 18 Japanese students interviewed and tested in the United States and 50 Japanese returnees by Bennett, Passin and McKnight (1958); for Mexicans both in the United States and Mexico by Beals and Humphrey (1957); and for Scandinavians in the United States and 50 Swedish returnees by Sewell and Davidson (1956) and Scott (1956). In addition there are studies directed at specific aspects of the sojourn experience: Selltiz, et al. (1963) focused on intergroup contact, attitude change, and orientation in approximately 500 foreign students in a number of American universities. Morris (1956, 1960) considered th variable of national status. Also related but not directly sponsored by Social Science Research Council are studies by Coelho (1958) and the Useems (1956) of Indian students, by Kelman, Bailyn (1962) of Scandinavians, by Kelman and Ezekiel (1970), and by Klein et al. (1971a & b) of Asian students. Their findings are supported and complemented by Studies of Peace Corps Volunteers (e.g. Textor, 1966; Spradley and Phillips, 1972; Jones and Popper, 1972) and reports of U.S. students overseas (e.g. Yeh et al., 1973). More recent reviews can be found in, in a text by Mestenhauser, (1976) and in Rhinesmith (1975).

Viewed as a whole these studies are important because they look beyond simple or superficial indices of adjustment and attitude change to examine the complex range of variables and processes involved in the foreign student experience. Theoretical stress is on concepts that relate the individual student to the social life space, i.e., national status, self-esteem, dual group membership, role conflict, identification, cultural distance, etc. Results show how complex the problem is: adaptation takes place on different levels; surface adjustment, achievement of specific goals, and global satisfaction may mask a deeper failure of meaningful interpersonal contact or enduring cognitive and affective change. There are many different target areas for influence, various patterns of adjustment and kinds of changes, many factors that impinge upon the foreign student in the United States, and different phases of adjustment. The highest quality research in this area is that which relates the full range of these variables to background and outcome factors, and that at the same time attempts to develop and test theoretical perspectives appropriate for explaining the processes involved in cross-cultural learning. At the same time there is need for the development of concrete, objective means for assessing adjustment and outcome in foreign student populations and for the conceptualization and measurement of personality factors sufficiently culture-general to be useful in cross-cultural research.

Patterns and Determinants of Adaptation

Adaptation can be defined as a process of attitudinal or behavioral change in response to new stimuli. Conflict and stress are key elements, (e.g. Spradley & Phillips, 1972), although specific stressors and conflicts vary across cultural groups. As I review phases and patterns of adjustment, consider the variables that influence adaptation: 1) the strength of motives for change (e.g. desire for contact); 2) the amount of change needed (e.g. cultural distance); 3) the individual's skills and coping resources (e.g. self-confidence, prior experience, interpersonal effectiveness); 4) characteristic stress responses; and 5) reinforcements provided by the new environment. Also bear in mind that adaptation can involve different roles or aspects of the sojourner's self (e.g. professional, interpersonal, national self-image, etc.) and can vary in depth, complexity or enduringness (see Kelman, 1965 and Kelman & Bailyn, 1962 for theoretical details).

Phases of Adjustment

Different phases of adjustment have been observed: Spectator phase (described by DuBois, Lysgaard, Coehlo) occurs when the student first arrives, is optimistic about ability to adjust, and favorably disposed to the U.S. Nationality is particularly salient in the self-image (McClintock and Davis); and the sojourner interacts as a cultural ambassador. The next phase is often a period of stress and adaptation, when conflict between home roles and expectations abroad are maximized and there is progressive disappointment and fault-finding. This stage is most difficult and prolonged with increased cultural distance. Most who survive this defensive, critical phase enter a more calm period of

coming-to-terms with more differentiated and favorable perceptions of the host and a greater level of social involvement. According to Coehlo, if this phase is extended over a long period of time it is likely to result in a weakening of national ties, and even to migration. Finally when the decision to return approaches, there is a reawakening of tension and self-examination. The more alienation from home, and the more the ambivalence about returning, the more acute are tensions at this time. Selltiz suggests that the timing of stress may be a function both of shifting academic and professional pressures and also situational demands for shift in role behavior or identity. For some the second peak of tension (the "W" curve) occurs while they are deciding whether or not to return; for others it occurs after they are home when they experience readjustment difficulties and second thoughts.

Patterns of Adaptation

The four most commonly observed patterns represent different processes of cross-cultural involvement and attitude change:

Instrumental adaptation. Characteristic of those with clear professional-academic goals; major interaction and involvement organized around specific tasks; extra-curricular social life continuous with home, i.e. contact maintained with fellow nationals; major tensions and adjustments in task performance; social adjustment and contact with host minimal and limited to professional role, changes primarily to satisfy academic needs and interests; minimal readjustment on return home unless professional roles are very different (e.g. adjusters).

Identification. Primary interest in involvement with host culture: academic or professional goals secondary to cross-cultural contact; major adjustments made to facilitate contacts and interaction with new culture, exploration of the community; interest in learning local customs. Interpersonal problems are the greatest source of stress for this group, with the level of tension high. Satisfying interactions are likely to lead to positive and/or differentiated attitudes toward the host country and to shifts in identification and interpersonal style. There is danger of alienation and readjustment tensions.

Withdrawal. Initial interest in involvement with host and academic or task purposes secondary to goal of new experience and cross-cultural contacts; efforts made to contact host and to explore the community; tensions arise in the interpsonal context and impede adjustment; there is a shift from disappointing relations with the host culture to primary contact with fellow-nationals; efforts are directed at restoration-maintenance of national identity. This pattern represents an attempt on the part of the sojourner to cope with unsatisfying social experiences. It is likely that great cultural distance, vulnerability to stress, and/or personal or cultural tendencies for sensitivity and withdrawal

will predispose this pattern. It is also expected that negative attitudes toward and selective perception of the faults of the host culture will prevail and that strong identification with home reference groups will be maintained where possible.

Resistance. The role of cultural ambassador is most salient; primary social contacts are maintained with own national group or other foreigners; interaction with host is organized around exchange of information about culture and the attitudes are largely dependent on the status accorded to the home country. Attitude change will be minor with no significant shift in national identification.

Consequences

Each pattern has its unique mix of costs and benefits. Instrumental adaptation and identification both facilitate positive sojourn experiences, but alienation from home is a clear risk for identification. Identification on the other hand, probably leads to more profound and enduring changes in outlook, including greater flexibility, tolerance and "internationalism." Withdrawal and resistance are costly because the aims of international exchange are not met, and because the individuals suffer. Withdrawal is probably the more stressful and frustrating of the two, and more likely to lead to enduring negative attitudes (reinforce negative stereotypes of the host culture).

Some Conclusions and Assumptions

Our own studies of foreign students' adaptation seem to support the following general conclusions.

1) Culture plays an important role in defininin the details of the role conflict and determines what is stressful, but patterns of adaptive responses to stress are similar across cultures.

2) Environmental factors are probably more powerful than personality in determining adaptation. Thus, characteristics of exchange programs, reactions of the host people, are tremendously potent.

3) Self-esteem and self-confidence (reflecting both personality and environmental support) are key factors in adaptation. Meaningful cross-cultural contact involves the positive reinforcement of social skills and learning of new skills. Noninvolvement or resistance to contact results from negative experiences with host (real or imagined) in the service of esteem-maintenance.

Questions for the Future

1. As international boundaries become more fluid, will adaptation be easier? Are they are other important patterns that should be explicated?

2. What are the ethical implications in programs that favor one pattern (e.g. identification). If we know the risks of each pattern, can we plan or intervene effectively?

3. Concepts from other fields can be useful. Social psychological studies of attitude change (e.g. Kelman) have helped us distinguish different kinds of change and adaptation. Another potentially useful model is Seligman's learned helplessness model. If maladaptation stems from lack of control over reinforcement (because the sojourner doesn't know the contingencies) then adaptation may be enhanced by restoring the sojourner's sense of control and teaching stimulus-response contingencies. Too much intervention and help may indeed increase helplessness, depression, and withdrawal.

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